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### Taking Him At His Word

What's that book in his pocket? Jinko Bronk asked assistant coach Kennedy Herbert, beside him on the bench. He was told it was The Stranger.

Well that's a good one 'cause in twenty seven years coaching baseball here he's the strangest yet. Says nothing and then when he does it's something awful fresh. Hey I can still cut a few of these egghead splinter-asses from this squad, especially among the freshman, but I guess they don't know that. Or care. Kennedy Herbert said he thought they all cared, his tone indicating that the sloppy play they had witnessed since this game began, that very instant being exemplified by Lucas Hoover's actually striking out on a ball barely in the county,

was somehow aberrational.

Oh God will you look at that! And why was he late today? this book reader down there at the end of the bench! Game starts with the first inning. That's why they call it the first inning.

He told him that Lorton Lanker, the player under discussion, had to finish a lab experiment in Physics.

Physics hey? I got A's in Physics. It's all about force and that sonabitch got none! Kennedy Herbert shrugged tardily, for Coach Bronk stared at him until he did. Too much emphasis on the brain here. What kind of college is this? I mean...well I know that sounds bad, but, well you know what I mean. Anyways, smart ones always think too much. Give me tough kid from inner city school and about a seven word vocabulary!

In response, Kennedy Herbert nodded towards the huge batter.

That Polack? He hits them further backwards than forwards. Indeed the ball had the next second gone forward, but foul, at an toweringly high, slicing angle, lifted even more by a hot gust towards a tangled mix of weeds and vines comprising a meadow half overlooking Ackeny Field, and half diving precipitously down to scruffy woods below its level.

In that lower portion under sparse-leaved generic trees and

swathed in yellowgreen light, Kit Spurgeon, a board on her lap, paints emerging weeds. Her motions jerk and blur that light. Intuitively knowing that action itself cannot detour restless truth, she somehow snaps a fragile brush and cuts her palm slightly.

On the field the huge batter finally pops up weakly to the catcher. Coach Bronk's team, in what resemble old softball uniforms, takes the field, their rag-tag assorted shapes passing through the other team, resplendent and large in creamy pinstripes, coming in to bat.

Yes sir! I do realize you hardly just got here but the other freshmen have done some duty already, so perhaps you could help your teammates out and go scout up that last foul ball? Since they're stuck with the inconvenience of playing the game out there I mean.

As a result of Jinko Bronk's request, Lorton Lanker finds himself browsing the meadow up the tangled hill from Kit Spurgeon, who is staring at her scratched hand in half-marine light: "Even that!" she remonstrates. "Why not at least cut a good one? You couldn't make me cry no matter what! Not anymore."

Lorton Lanker feels the wind ballooning his thin shirt. Coach's Further! shoots at him as he reaches the downward plunge

of the meadow into the woods. Further!--he isn't sure whether Coach roars it again or if it's an unsettling echo as he shortlegs down the hill.

Seeing Kit, he's uncomfortable being caught in servile task, and in a flapping uniform three sizes too big. She takes him for symbol, a thing called student-athlete, it knowing computers and ground balls and, appropriately enough, sporting islands of acne scars. Isn't it ugly? she thinks. Riotously so!

For his ensuing part, "Little Miss Artsy Fartsy in the windblowy woods oh my!" he mutters under his breath, relatively graceful in his descent until the last vines enwrap his ankles, he and his Adams Apple hung there for her comment--which she is timing, he acutely knows.

"Ball! You see a...?" he blurts to sidetrack her while catapulting out from the vines.

She looks down to the small dot of blood on her hand, a glacial smile welling, then up to him, her face a perverse yellow flower. "Oh?" A single bird sings monotonously, some few leaves flutter, a spectator whistles in the small crowd watching the game, and cars buzz along a distant highway. "And. Pray tell! What would you be?" she smiles malignantly, "The Designated Fetcher?"

NO! I'M THE

Could have made a ball in this time!

DES-

Noodles Reber has fallen and crawls on his hands and knees back to first base. You see that! So he fell? Look how he, whatchacallit, persevered, the rest of you guys! Hey you give up you're out! Like life! You ask Kennedy...when he played here!

IGNATED FU--

Where'd he go for that foul ball?

Three brushes fly up against the dappled light, their ferrules blinking a brassy semaphore, and the air appropriates a force somehow, rowing up hill and through weedy meadow towards the glittering ballpark, riffling the backs of the uniforms of players standing in the outfield, whirling napkins and gum wrappers around the infield, and eventually blowing dirt into the eyes of Kennedy Herbert and Jinko Bronk.

Goddamn! This fuckin Saudi Arabia or something? Anyways, cut him if he gets back. He's off the squad! Couldn't find his ass with both hands.